



Recent Rivette. An Inter-Re-View

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dated *Chinatown* is an obituary reprise. Suddenly, in the hands of Robert Altman and then Roman Polanski, the essential narrative fabric of physical action and concrete mystery in these fictions has been partly discarded, partly re-woven, and the genre turns introspective and allegorical, tacitly renaming itself in the process as the metaphysical "private I" film: a study in

the lost and homeless modern soul, pitted against a corruption it can barely fend off, let alone cure. The title *Chinatown*, like *The Long Goodbye* and *The Big Sleep* before it, is also a metaphor and a euphemism for death—physical, spiritual, even cultural—and despite Noah Cross's apocalyptic scheme, there are no green pastures in the Valley of its shadow.

WILLIAM JOHNSON

Recent Rivette—An Inter-Re-view

*And when I found the door was shut,
I tried to turn the handle, but—*

—Lewis Carroll, ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Paris Belongs to Us: nameless menace. *Mad Love*: a 4½-hour decline into schizophrenia. Rumors of the original *Out One*: a 13-hour reprise of nameless menace. By now I expect any new film by Jacques Rivette to be slow and somber, reflecting gloom and taciturnity in its maker.

I'm wrong.

Céline and Julie Go Boating (1973) is an exhilarating film; Rivette turns out to be cheerful, animated, articulate.

JR: *I try to make the kind of films I enjoy as a spectator. When you've seen a lot of films, as you and I have, nine times out of ten you know what's going to happen. I like films where you don't know. . . . I like endless stories, on the lines of an Arabian Nights—or soap opera.*

Céline and Julie is an endless story, hard to summarize. Céline (Juliet Berto) does a magician act in a Montmartre nightclub; Julie (Dominique Labourier) works in a library. They may know each other before the story begins, but

seem to meet by accident. Julie is sitting in a park when Céline dashes past, dropping a scarf, and Julie runs after her. Céline tells her an obviously made-up tale about stumbling into a sinister plot and being held prisoner in a house. But the house she describes is real, and the two of them take turns going there. At first they stagger out of the house with only brief visions of what they've seen inside. Later, under the stimulus of candies which they find in their mouths after each visit, they're able to summon up progressively longer visions. There is a young widower, his small daughter, two women who are rivals for the widower's affections, and a nurse (a double of whichever of Céline and Julie is having the vision). The scenes in which these characters take part, disconnected at first, gradually piece themselves together: the sequence culminates in the unexplained death of the small daughter.

Céline and Julie decide to rescue the girl. Protected with magic charms, they both dress up as the nurse and insert themselves into the sequence of events, which now takes on the appearance of a theatrical performance. In a hilarious climax, Céline and Julie flounder about and flub their lines while the other "actors" continue unperturbed; but the heroines manage to

From one of the
"house" scenes in
CELINE AND JULIE:
Camille watches
as Sophie makes
overtures to
Olivier.



detect one of the women preparing poison, and they carry the girl out of the house in time.

Now, after the film has been running for just over three of its 3¼ hours, Céline and Julie go boating. As they drift down the river with Madlyn, the rescued girl, they pass a boat which carries the widower and the two women in a frozen, livid tableau. The film then ends as it began, in the park, except that this time it is Julie who dashes past Céline.

Although *Céline and Julie* is Rivette's first film which goes in for sustained comedy its parentage with his earlier work remains clear. (The one film that stands apart is *La Religieuse*:

JR: *This was quite different. I didn't write the script—it was an exercise in pure mise en scène.*)

Three recurring elements account for most of the family likeness in Rivette's films:

One: the action revolves around some kind of theatrical enterprise—rehearsals of Shakespeare's *Pericles* in *Paris Belongs to Us*, of Racine's *Andromaque* in *Mad Love*, of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and *Seven Against Thebes* in *Out One*. In *Céline and Julie*, the events inside the house take on this theatrical dimension.

JR: *At first we planned to present these events as a film-within-a-film, with Céline and Julie as editors doing their own montage of the different*

scenes. But a film-within-a-film has been done before. . . . So we kept the basic idea but cut out all the specifics of film viewing and editing.

Instead, there are specifics of the theater—*trois coups*, applause, etc.

In contrast with this recurrent stylized element,—

Two: Rivette makes extensive use of improvisation.

JR: *We had a two-page script of Céline and Julie, but that was just something to show the producer. We started shooting only two months after I first discussed the idea of the film.*

Several members of the cast share in the screenplay credits for *Céline and Julie*; all of the cast do so for *Out One*. Improvisation, for Rivette, isn't limited to the dialogue and action within each scene; it may determine the nature of the scene or change the course of the whole film.

JR: *Mad Love became longer and more "difficult," more serious, as the filming went on. Out One, on the other hand, seemed more serious in its early stages and gradually became more dreamlike. We started shooting it with no idea of the final shape of the film or even how the action would end.*

Three: An atmosphere of mystery and ambiguity pervades Rivette's films. This is true even of the apparently more straightforward *Mad Love*, since the viewer cannot say for certain how much of the two protagonists' aberrant behavior is feigned rather than genuine. The atmosphere is dominant in the other films, reaching an extreme of complexity in *Out One* (1970).

This is a pivotal film, combining the somber anxiety of *Paris Belongs to Us* (of which it could be considered an elaborate reworking) with the lighter approach of *Céline and Julie*. It is also the film in which Rivette has so far invested the most effort: after completing the 13-hour original, he returned to the editing table to produce a 4½-hour version—

(JR: *The most difficult editing job I've ever done*)—under the title *Out One/Spectre*¹ (1974). It is this "short" version which was shown at the New York Film Festival along with *Céline and Julie* and on which my critique is based.

Spectre raises all kinds of oblique hints about the existence of a secret society of 13 friends, inspired by Balzac's *Histoire des Treize*.² Apparently (a word one wants to keep using when describing a Rivette film) the group was started partly as a joke and is now—as the action begins—dormant; but when two outsiders become involved it (apparently) revives. One outsider is Frédérique (Juliet Berto), a professional sponger who gets her hands on some correspondence between members of the 13 and sees it as an opportunity to try some half-hearted black-

mail. The other is Colin (Jean-Pierre Léaud), a layabout with a far more curious (in all senses of the word) mind; after stumbling on various cryptic messages with references to the *Histoire des Treize* (and also to *The Hunting of the Snark*) he sets out to investigate the group and becomes obsessed to the point of insanity with the enigma. But neither he nor the viewer discovers any solid facts about the group's activities.

Faced with such tangles of unexplained mysteries as *Spectre* and *Céline and Julie*, the viewer may first try to puzzle out what's really happening. This is a mistake. Rivette's films contain two levels of mystery, one superficial and the other central, and anyone who becomes enmeshed in the first may never reach the second.

The first level glitters with enticing clues and allusions. A scholarly critic could fill page after page analyzing all the references to Balzac and Lewis Carroll in *Spectre*—and say absolutely nothing of importance about the film. *Céline and Julie* is even more insidious. It contains one overt quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*, when Madlyn is reading the book, and thus tempts the viewer to find countless examples of what may be indirect references: in the opening scene, Céline functions as the White Rabbit, drawing Julie into an adventure; there is the same difficulty that Alice had in gaining entry into a house; the heroines are affected magically by something they eat; a boating scene also occurs as an appendage in Carroll, in verses evoking the river trip where he first conceived Alice's adventures; the film introduces enigmatic cats which might belong to Cheshire. . . . And already this line of investigation has strayed from the probable to the possible and is slipping into the pointless.

JR: *I like inserting traps for the critics.*

But the biggest traps are the ones that Rivette *doesn't* insert—the fortuitous clues that a critic starts to see when he stares too long at the first level of mystery. For example—

WJ: Céline and Julie keep emerging from the house with a candy which enables them to see further visions. Later Madlyn offers them the

OUT ONE/SPECTRE: Frédérique (right) meets with lawyer Lucie to try and blackmail her.



same kind of candy. I wonder whether you picked the girl's name because you were referring to another kind of confection which induced visions—the *madeleine* in Proust?

JR (*laughing*): No, I didn't think of it! But if that's what you see, then it's there for you—that's your film.

WJ: Well, leaving Proust out of it, I still feel that the scenes inside the house represent the past. At the end, when Céline and Julie take part in those scenes, the faces of the other characters become livid and death-like—as if the past turns to ashes when the two women try to relive it.

JR: *We made the characters look that way partly because Céline and Julie, being in the action with them instead of looking at them from the outside, start to see them more critically. Also, the action now becomes like a theatrical performance, and the camera sees it as if from the wings, where the lighting looks harsh and the make-up unrealistic.*

WJ: I see. But there are also hints that Camille [Bulle Ogier: one of the women in the house] is Julie's mother when young. Julie mentions that her mother travels a lot and has sent her a postcard from Borneo. Camille says *she* wants to travel a lot and visit places like Borneo. . . .

JR: *Well, it wasn't planned that way. Eduardo di Gregorio [who collaborated on the script] added that line at the last moment, when we were filming Camille's monologue.*

WJ (after a pause): Let's turn to another question. . . .

Obviously, anyone who tries to make sense of a Rivette film by collating all of the first-level details is asking for trouble—the same kind of trouble that Colin plunges into when he tries too hard to solve the mystery of the 13. That way madness lies.

A much safer response is to dismiss Rivette's films as elaborate games without any second level of meaning worth bothering about. Then one risks only boredom—the fate of the rigorously pragmatic *Frédérique*.³

In making these comparisons with Colin and *Frédérique* I am already, of course, adducing a

second level of meaning in *Spectre*. What's important in this film is not the “truth” about the 13 and their activities but the attitudes of the two outsiders. Colin and *Frédérique* represent extreme reactions to the mysterious epiphenomena of the 13: Colin sets out indefatigably to fit them into a neat structure; *Frédérique* behaves as if no structure exists.

Which leads to a fairly straightforward interpretation of *Spectre* on its second level: in real life we're faced with phenomena that have much the same mystery and ambiguity as the first-level details of a Rivette film; it's a mistake to try to look for a system that will account for everything; but it's also a mistake to look for no structure at all.

JR: *I like my films to have at least two or three interpretations—not fixed, but shifting.* (He spreads his fingers and moves his hands to and fro across each other.)

The weakness of *Spectre*—for me—is that this one interpretation exhausts the second level of meaning. Colin and *Frédérique* have no resonance, practically no existence, outside their reactions to the presumed 13. Some of these latter characters do have more potential, but they remain trapped within the first level of mystery: their behavior *must* keep the viewer guessing about the “truth” or else Colin and *Frédérique* will lose their wider significance. Rivette and his collaborators work hard to overcome this problem: many scenes convincingly suggest that the 13 themselves have distinct,

Juliet Berto, near the end of the film.



partial and inconsistent notions of what the "truth" is. But this cannot alter the impression that mystification is essential above all to prevent the film from collapsing; that the characters are chained—loosely, but still chained—to a plot device.

Although *Céline and Julie* too can be described as a film about outsiders (Céline and Julie) reacting to mysterious insiders (the characters in the house) it avoids the central weakness of *Spectre*. Since the insiders appear only in a small number of basic scenes—repeated in various lengths and combinations—the mystery about them does not have to be sustained primarily by their words and actions. It is not they but the two heroines' peculiar view of them which obscures or filters the "truth."

Of course, having so little to do, the insiders appear much less complex and interesting than the 13 in *Spectre*. But this doesn't matter. What's important is that the outsiders are *more* complex than Colin and Frédérique. In fact, there is as much mystery about Céline and Julie as there is about what's going on inside the house. And since the two mysteries are linked, it's easy to permute them into "at least two or three interpretations."

Céline and Julie could be old friends, or new friends, or two aspects of the same person (on several occasions they exchange roles). The events in the house could be a dream or hallucination; they could spring from real-life memories of Julie, or Céline, or Céline/Julie; they could be a hypnotic story made up by C. J. or C/J to account for the visit of a kid sister or niece; or they could represent another dimension of real life—like events seen on television—which draw C, J or C/J into a broader involvement with the world.

All this and more is possible, but none of it is necessary. While watching *Céline and Julie* I did not feel irritated by its first-level mysteries (as I did from time to time with *Spectre*); nor at the end did I feel any urgent need to work out an interpretation. (This isn't a copout: I did work one out which I'll come to later.) *Céline and Julie* is a film that can satisfy before it makes sense.

It can do this largely because Rivette and his collaborators have steeped it in elements of immediate appeal. There's comedy, broad humor, even slapstick. There's suspense: the viewer wants to find out how the fragmentary scenes in the house will fit together and which of the characters will be killed—first-level mysteries which for once do *not* lead to frustration. There's warmth and liveliness (as well as whimsy) in the relationship between Céline and Julie. Visually, the film glows with summery colors.⁴

JR: *As to influences on the film, I like to think of it as "Grandson of Hitchcock and Renoir."*

The sheer enjoyability of *Céline and Julie* brings out a feature of Rivette's film-making which may escape notice in his earlier work:

JR: *I try to make my films in the most simple way possible.*

STEPHANE TCHALGADJIEFF, producer of *Out One* (raising his eyebrows): Simple??

JR: *Yes—within the given framework, of course.*

In *Céline and Julie*, as in all of Rivette's films, the first-level mystification arises from content and editing, not from showy camerawork or effects. Nor does he attempt to score obvious points in profundity—to juggle pretentiously, for example, with illusion and reality. On the contrary, his straightforward approach minimizes the breaks between what in most other films would be different levels of reality, so that when Céline and Julie suddenly and inexplicably find themselves looking at the events inside the house, the transition becomes as acceptable as a straight cut to a subjective view or a flashback.⁵

In its formal development, *Céline and Julie* is the most compelling of Rivette's films. After a relaxed start the action gradually accelerates, building up step by step to the hilarious climax before the brief and unexpectedly quiet ending.

This formal shape is all the more remarkable because of the importance that Rivette attaches to improvisation:

JR: *I'm interested not just in telling a story but in seeing what happens during the filming—the atmospheric touches that arise. . . . Some time ago I saw the first assemblage of Jean Rouch's *Petit à Petit* based on improvised scenes with Africans. It ran for nine hours; nothing happened; but it was fascinating. It lost a lot when Rouch cut it to 90 minutes or so. . . . Cinema is designed to capture the unexpected.*

Not surprisingly, Rivette's devotion to the unexpected makes his own films swell to unusual size:

JR: *I realize that some viewers object to the length of my films and find the temps morts painful.*

While I'm not enthusiastic about the length of *Mad Love* or *Spectre*, even these do not give me the floundering sensation I get from most other directors who rely heavily on improvisation. Looking back at the two films, I become aware of the unobtrusive but acute control that must lie behind them—a control which can be deduced from some of the economical camera setups and, above all, from the editing.

With *Céline and Julie*, Rivette takes this control even further:

JR: *In editing Céline and Julie I tried to cut to the bone.*

Well, bone isn't conspicuous, and two sequences could still benefit from trimming (Julie's pursuit of Céline at the beginning, and the two women's giggly reactions to the candy-induced visions)—but in general Rivette's editing carries the film through its 3¼ hours with verve and assurance. There is, for the first time in his work, an equal and dynamic balance between freedom and organization.

This balance reflects what I take to be the theme of the film. While *Céline and Julie* covers much of the same ground as in Rivette's other work, notably *Spectre*, his new approach helps it to explore even further.

At the beginning of the film Céline and Julie

are free, in the sense of being uncommitted to any course of thought or action. Julie, at least, is free to the point of boredom—rather like Frédérique in *Spectre*. Then, following up a few casual remarks by Céline, they become involved in a mystery—they shift to a role rather like Colin's. But their involvement develops more quickly and dramatically. We see the events in the house start as a single idea, grow into a set of ideas, become organized into a pattern and solidify into a blueprint for action. The ambiguous status of the events—subjective or objective?—matches that of any system of ideas which the human mind develops to explain reality. From one point of view we *discover* a pattern which seems to exist in the outside world, but from another point of view we *create* it in our own mind. Rivette accordingly depicts Céline and Julie as neither discovering nor creating the pattern in the house but as “dis-crating” it—a filmic portmanteau which may represent another allusion to *Alice*.

Whatever its status, the pattern seems so real to Céline and Julie that they decide to act on it: they set out to rescue Madlyn. By giving their intervention the trappings of a stage performance, Rivette introduces a parallel with his earlier films which also underlines an important difference. For the theatrical enterprises in *Paris Belongs to Us*, *Mad Love* and *Spectre* go through interminable rehearsals but never reach a performance.

JR: *My protagonists are directors who don't want to succeed.*

Going into performance would foreclose on the directors' options, ending their freedom to modify and perfect their ideas. They hesitate to commit themselves to any one system of thought. But Céline and Julie do commit themselves. They act; they are successful.

Or are they?

JR: *I can only film losers. It's true, Céline and Julie are different. But you could say that, at the end, when they encounter the other boat, the sinister figures in it take them over.*

You could also say there are other interpretations. In committing themselves to their system of belief, Céline and Julie obtain a specific success (they rescue Madlyn). At the same time they expose the general weakness of the system, which loses touch with life and turns rigid (the deathly tableau in the boat). So they try to embark on another adventure of discovery/creation (the final scene in the park).

This adventure begins in the same place and in the same way as the first—which suggests that the pattern may indeed have “taken them over” and they can only repeat it. But their roles are now reversed—which suggests that they may be able to vary the pattern and give it new vitality. The ending remains open.

Not having formulated this interpretation when I interviewed Rivette, I couldn't ask for his comments. No doubt he would have said: If that's what you see, that's your film.

I hope other viewers find their *Céline and Julie* as enjoyable and provocative as I do mine. In any case, if the achievement of the two heroines remains in doubt, Rivette's does not: he has indeed varied the pattern of his previous films and infused it with new vitality.

NOTES

1. While noncommittal about the mysteries in his films, Rivette readily explained this title. “I chose ‘Out’ as the opposite of the vogue word ‘in,’ which had caught on in France and which I thought was silly. The action of the film is rather like a serial which could continue through several episodes, so I gave it the number ‘One.’ The reduced version make me think of a refraction of the original through a prism, hence ‘Spectre’ [French for ‘spectrum’].”

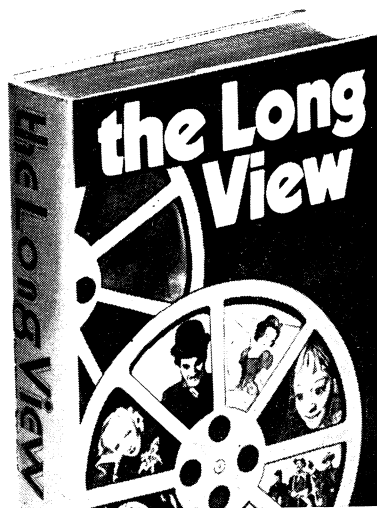
2. As a “Balzac expert” (Eric Rohmer) briefly explains in the film, the *Histoire des Treize* consists of three novels, *Ferragus*, *The Duchess of Langeais* and *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. The 13—men of high position in Paris society—remain for the most part behind the scenes, intervening only at one crucial moment in each novel. While these interventions all concern personal crises, Balzac suggests that the general aims of the 13 might be idealistic, political, or even criminal.

3. At the end of *Spectre*, Frédérique is seen rolling to and fro on her bed in a frenzy of boredom. Rivette tells

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documentary film maker
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— Robert Mazzocco,
New York Review of Books

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me that at the end of the original *Out One* she is killed—which may or may not suggest that her condition was terminal.

4. A notable technical achievement, since the film was shot in 16mm and blown up to 35.

5. Or, to put it another way, a straight cut in a “normal” film may imply as wild a transition as anything in Rivette. In Jacques Tourneur’s *Experiment Perilous*, a

typical romantic melodrama of the forties which I happened to see shortly after *Céline and Julie*, there is a sequence of flashbacks to accompany George Brent’s reading of a diary. Then the phone rings, and he returns to his surroundings with a start. “I was living in that diary,” he says. Filmically, this is exactly the same process by which Céline and Julie find themselves living in the house.

JEAN-LOUIS BAUDRY

Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus¹

The debate over cinema and ideology let loose by the spectacular political events in France of May 1968 has transformed Cahiers du Cinéma and much of French film thought. Baudry’s article, which appeared in 1970 in Cinéthique (No. 7-8; translated by permission) is characteristic of the attempts that have been made to criticize the ideological underpinnings of previous film thought, and to ground new work in a more self-conscious and self-critical set of assumptions. This questioning mode of thought turns from what it considers outmoded idealist of phenomenological doctrines toward the type of radical psychoanalytic thinking done by Lacan and toward an explicit sociopolitical analysis of the film-making and film-viewing process.

Baudry’s article covers a broad range, and at times his points are made in an allusive or even elusive way. Certain key terms and usages have been glossed in the notes. A few irreducible obscurities remain, which the French postal strike has prevented us from clarifying. The article is presented here as a central document in the recent evolution of French film thought.

At the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he seeks to integrate dream elaboration and its particular “economy” with the psyche as a whole, Freud assigns to the latter an optical model: “Let us simply imagine the instrument which serves in psychic productions as a sort of complicated microscope or camera.” But Freud

does not seem to hold strongly to this optical model, which, as Derrida has pointed out,² brings out the shortcoming in graphic representation in the area earlier covered by his work on dreams. Moreover, he will later abandon the optical model in favor of a writing instrument, the “mystic writing pad.” Nonetheless this op-